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THE CONCENTRIC RINGS OF SOUTHERN BAPTIST LIFE

T Gary Farley

For centuries scholars have debated the meaning of Ezekiel's vision of a wheel in the middle of a wheel (Ezek. 1:16). And while it was probably not the future organization of Baptist denominational life that he was seeing, the wheel in a wheel concept is a useful model for visualizing the connections between Baptist organizations. Actually, Baptists take as the focal Scripture for our work the Missionary Commission found in Acts 1:8. We are to be witnesses locally, regionally, nationally, and around the world. We have organized to do this faithfully, efficiently, effectively, and lovingly under the leadership of God's Holy Spirit.

Here I will employ the model of concentric rings to discuss Baptist organizational principles. I will look at the center and then the six rings that radiate out from it, or if you prefer, six wheels. The reason that this is such an appropriate model for Southern Baptists is that the rings are on the same plane, not hierarchically arranged.

The center is the living Christ. He is the bridegroom of the church. He gave His life to ransom it. He calls forth faith in those who choose to become a part of the church. He sustains and cares for the church. And He will call the church out of this world at the end of the age into the new, redeemed world. Jesus is the head of the church. His will must dominate its work. As the body of Christ, the church must ever be responsive to its head.

English Baptists first appeared in the seventeenth century. They arose as a reaction to the abuse of centuries of focusing on the universal church to the hurt of the local church. Organized like a monarchy or like a huge modern corporation, decisions were made at headquarters that were to be carried out without question at the local level. Apparently, it was believed that God would speak only to the highly educated professionals, but not to just plain folk in the pews.

Baptists contended that individual Christians and local churches must be free to hear and respond to the commands of God. This belief came to be formulated as the precious doctrine of soul competency. Baptists believed then and now that neither men nor man-made institutions can limit the freedom of God to save, call, and commission anyone to a work for Him. And as a corollary, the local church is not to be a "franchise" of the church universal to carry out instructions from headquarters. Rather, it is to be free to work the way God instructs it.

This concept formulated the autonomy of the local church--an honored Baptist principle. This was indeed a radical and frightening idea. Kings and bishops did not want to surrender control. They wanted to issue edicts and plans that would be carried out faithfully at the local level. So, our Baptist forefathers were persecuted for this radical belief.

Early Baptists saw the tasks of the local church to include worship, witnessing, intercessory prayer, Bible study and instruction, and the fostering of spiritual growth. The members covenanted together to assist one another materially and spiritually. Through the years, the ways Baptists have sought to accomplish these tasks has changed. We have been open to new means and methods. Gospel hymns, revivals, paid pastors and staffs, Sunday Schools, and Church Training are among the changes which have occurred in the local church.

Interestingly, this fierce commitment to the freedom of the individual and of the local church did not lead to isolation for most Baptists and Baptist congregations. Before the passing of the first generation of English Baptists, the churches began to connect themselves with other Baptists churches in their area of fellowship, counsel, and performance of the Great Commission. And associationalism became one of the most significant and *saving* feature of the Baptist movement. I use the term *saving* because it kept us from escaping the error of an hierarchically ordered denomination and falling into the error of total independency.

If Christ is the center and the local church is the first of the concentric rings, then the area association of Southern Baptist churches is the second. At its best the association has provided stability, order, fellowship, counsel, and a world vision which has aided its member congregations in keeping their focus on Jesus as Lord. The churches join and participate freely. As a ring with the same center as the local church, it is not above the church. They are on the same plane. And the lines making up the rings are not solid. Communication and resources flow both ways. The association exists to serve Christ and the churches. The churches aid the association because its Commission can be furthered by the resources of the association.

The 38,000 churches that relate to the Southern Baptist Convention are members of more than 1,200 associations. Some associations have as few as three or four congregations, others over 100. Some serve churches in only one part of a county, some several counties; and still others extend into three or four states. Some are made of congregations diverse in age, size, style, membership, ethnicity, and theology. Others are very much alike. Some have only one annual meeting; others have this plus many training meetings and resources. And still others operate extensive ministries on behalf of the churches.

Most associations are funded by member churches. However, in about 200, the Home Mission Board supplements the salary of the director of missions. And some of the ministries of other associations are staffed by HMB appointed missionaries. Ideally, in each instance the association is doing for the churches what they want it to do within the limitations of its resources.

Most associations are served by one of the 900 directors of missions. Most of these missionaries see themselves as mission strategists. Their association(s) has as its primary task to extend and strengthen the kingdom of God in that geographical area. They look for places that need new missions. They identify pockets of unchurched/unreached persons.

These directors of missions are aware of resources available within the association and from the state and SBC agencies that might be deployed to reach that area or that group of persons. They assist in bringing needs and resources together. They win victories for the kingdom. Directors of missions see needs within the existing congregations for training, leadership, and resources—and then move to meet these needs. They work with the congregations to strengthen programs of Bible study, evangelism, missions education, discipleship training, and music education. The goal of the director of missions is to have such a variety of churches and programs that all persons within the territory served by the association can receive an appealing gospel witness and have a meaningful opportunity for worship and spiritual growth.

One of the exciting innovations for associations in recent years has been the linking of stronger associations with developing ones in the North and the West. Associations are now sharing their expertise, skills, and resources with places that are lacking in these. And both are strengthened.

The third concentric ring is that of the state convention or fellowship. The whole of the United States is included. Some state conventions, such as Texas and North Carolina, are comprised of thousands of churches. They have large staffs and operate extensive programs for education, evangelism, health care, as

well as care for the aged and for children. They provide leadership training for the churches, aid in starting new congregations, and provide a variety of ministries.

It is clear that here too the lines of the ring are open. Communication and resources flow both ways. It should also be clear that the genius of Southern Baptists is that--in our insistence that God can and does speak directly to individuals and to local churches--He does not do so exclusively. God may also speak to a leader of an association or of a state convention. He may reveal to him/her a task or a project that is appropriate for that particular sphere. For example, the leaders of the Baptist General Convention of Texas felt impressed that God wanted 2,000 additional churches and missions in Texas by 1990. This vision was shared and affirmed by the churches.

The Southern Baptist Convention and its several agencies, boards, commissions, and auxiliary comprise the fourth concentric ring. Again, it lies in the same plane, only the geographic extent is essentially different. The SBC works across the entire nation. In larger conventions, many of these activities are mirrored by state convention agencies. In others, the various agencies work locally in terms of cooperative agreements. In essence, the various institutions and agencies can be said to have their roots in the needs of the churches, and they function to assist the churches in accomplishing their work.

For example, the Sunday School Board publishes materials that assist the churches in their worship, Bible study, discipleship, and ministry activities. The Brotherhood Commission and the Woman's Missionary Union aid the church in its missions education, action, and support. The Home and Foreign Mission Boards appoint missionaries, channel funds, coordinate missions projects, and carry out evangelistic and ministry activities. The Stewardship Commission assists in raising money. The Christian Life Commission deals with moral issues. The Education Commission relates to colleges. The seminaries and Seminary Extension train ministers. And the Annuity Board provides for retirement income for pastors and missionaries. Much more might be added, but this gives an indication of what the SBC is doing.

The outer rings are the Baptist World Alliance, which includes all Baptist bodies in the world; and the kingdom of God, which includes all believers, their churches, and agencies.

As with any example, one might find fault with the concentric rings model for understanding the life of Southern Baptists. But it can be useful in clarifying these points:

- Christ must be at the center of everything we are and do.
- All Baptist life is in the same plane and on the same level.
- We have no hierarchy, only differences of responsibility and area of ministry.
- The local church is the most basic institution. It alone is the body and the bride of Christ.
- Associations and conventions exist to serve the bride of Christ.
- God can save, call, commission, and give a vision of ministry to anyone in any of the rings of Baptist life.
- Cooperation in associations and conventions and alliances can save a church from being self-centered as well as making it more faithful, efficient, and effective in carrying out its mission.

A wheel in a wheel. A ring in a ring. The center in Christ. The work is Christ. Differences are functional.